

3 programs will make fun gifts

Computer gifts should be low cost and fun to use.

Here are three that meet those criteria. One lets you crank out banner-long signs on your printer, another offers comic interludes for any computer session, and the third realistically simulates the game of blackjack.

■ Sign Designer. Using your dot matrix printer and this easy-to-use program you can print professional looking signs and banners. Setting up a print job is a matter of just typing in your text and selecting character heights and type styles.

Letters can range from 3 inches up to 7 feet and three type styles are available: Executive, Block, and Gothic. Your sign can include up to 10 lines, with up to 122 characters per line.

There are two modes of printing: high density for slick results and draft for fast printing.

It takes a while for a dot matrix printer to fill-in all the letters on a big sign, but it's a great way to create attention at meetings, parties or garage sales.



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BUSINESS TOOLS

■ Computer Comic. This memory-resident program takes a light-hearted approach to using computers. It's like having your own stand-up comic on screen.

You can set the program so that it displays a joke every time your computer is turned on. Then, once its loaded into memory, you can pop up a joke any time you want by pressing the Alt and "J" keys. For two-part jokes, pressing any key delivers the punch line.

The jokes are supposedly new and written by Hollywood's "top" writers. Keyboard Comedy claims the topics take a lighthearted look at various professionals. I found some of the jokes funny, but most were just cheap shots and somewhat tasteless. Here's the kind of humor you can expect from this program:

"Dan Quayle always said he would have scored much higher on his SATs if the fellow in front of him had applied himself more diligently."

■ BlackJack. If you're planning a trip to Las Vegas, Nev., or Atlantic City, N.J., and expect to spend time at the blackjack or 21 gaming tables, you should practice first with this simulation game.

The sophisticated program lets you customize the playing environment to match the prevailing rules at different casinos. You can specify how many decks the dealer is using, the upper and lower limits on table bets, or whether the dealer has to "hit" on a "soft 17."

You establish credit and as you play your waning or waxing fortunes are tracked in one corner of the screen.

This program addresses a full range of skill levels. For the more advanced, there is a built-in statistical analysis feature that reviews your playing style. For players of all skill levels, a comprehensive book is included that demystifies blackjack options such as surren-

dering, double down, insurance and dealer probabilities.

■ The Bottom Line: Sign Designer is the kind of practical program that just about anyone could find a use for. I'd be far more wary about giving The Computer Comic. MicroAce Blackjack, on the other hand, is sure to please any aficionado of the game. It's fun pretending to play against the house and developing strategies without actually losing any money.

Sign Designer is published by Power Up!, Channelmark Corp., 2929 Campus Drive, San Mateo, Calif. 94403, (800) 532-6982, \$49.95.

Computer Comic is published by Keyboard Comedy, 4040 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla, Calif. 92037, (619) 450-9305, \$24.95.

MicroAce Blackjack is published by MicroAce, P.O. Box 5223, Englewood, Colo. 80155, (303) 290-9853, \$49.95.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars, and books designed to enhance business productivity.